

Women in Pre-Colonial and Colonial Nigeria

The position of women in pre-colonial Nigeria **obviously** differed in the vast number of **ethnic** groups in Nigeria. A woman's position **varied** according to the (1) kinship **structure** of the group and (2) **role** of women within the **economic structure** of the society. Common **factors** among women of different **ethnic** groups, however, included the **domestically oriented jobs** and the **range** of **economic** activities that the societies reserved for women. Women in pre-colonial societies held a complementary position to men although patrilineal and patriarchal kinship **structures** predominated Nigerian societies. The kinship group expected women who married into a Yoruba or Igbo patrilineage to give birth to sons to **ensure** the future of the group. Furthermore, the position of a young wife improved as she grew older, bore children, and earned approval from its older members. She gained **assistance** from younger wives as she grew older, thus allowing her to spend less time in the home and more time engaging in activities outside the household--activities such as farming and craft making which allowed her to provide the material **resources** needed in order to care for her family. Yoruba society offered the greatest opportunities for women to **participate** in other **economic** activities such as manufacturing and trade. In Yoruba society, the responsibility of a woman to provide for her family included providing the material **resources** for such care. Women believed that providing such **resources** met their responsibility as women and citizens. Their society considered the work the women did complementary to the work of men, and some women **achieved** impressive **status** in the **economic** and social realms of Yoruba life. However, more commonly, women **achieved** power by means of their lineage or by means of marriage into ruling families. By **achieving** such power, they **obtained** indirect political influence, but they rarely showed their influence in public.

Like the family and **economic structures**, the religions of many Nigerian tribal societies conceived the position of women as complementary to that of men. However, the fact remains that the societies of Pre-Colonial Nigeria believed men superior to women and, to some extent, in control of women. According to Carolynne Dennis, writer of *Women and State in Nigeria*, "The religions of many Nigerian societies recognized the social importance of women by **emphasizing** the place of female gods of fertility and social peace, but women were also associated with witchcraft which appeared to **symbolize** the **potential** social danger of women exercising power uncontrolled by men" (15). In societies that did not confine women to the household as the Hausa did, women held important **roles** in agriculture, manufacturing, and trade, and women also possessed an important, if **restricted**, religious **role**. However, religion also provided an important means of controlling women by explaining that women acting outside their **appropriate** social **role**, unconfined by men led to dangerous results.

Women held a basically complementary, rather than subordinate, position to men in indigenous pre-colonial Nigerian society, which based power on seniority rather than gender. The absence of gender in the pronouns of many African languages and the interchangeability of first names among females and males strikes Niara Sudarkasa, author of "'The **Status** of Women' in Indigenous African Societies" in the anthology *Women in Africa and the African Diaspora*, as a further relation of the social de-emphasis on gender as a designation for behavior. She observes that "many other **areas** of **traditional culture**, including personal dress and adornment, religious ceremonials, and intragender patterns of comportment, suggest that Africans often deemphasize gender in relation to seniority and other insignia of **status**" (36). However, **despite** the lack of **emphasis** placed on gender by Nigeria's indigenous societies, the state and its bureaucracy tried to dictate the lifestyles of women, endorsing the domesticity of women and the unwaged services they provided for the family. Much of the **legislation**

concerning women, therefore, attempted to control them, their **sexuality** and fertility, further **defining** their subordination. The beginning of colonial rule brought to Africa the European **notion** that women belonged in the home, nurturing their family. At the same time the societies expected women to work--work which the society considered complementary to that done by men--the state and the beginning of colonial rule began to change the **roles** of women by means of **legislation restricting** women and the **focusing** of colonial **economics** on men.

The colonization of Africa by European powers including Britain, France, Italy, Germany, Belgium, and Portugal brought Africa into the world **economic** system as a **major target** for exploitation. Africa not only provided Europeans with a **source** of raw materials but it also provided them with what they viewed as raw, uncivilized people -- if Europeans considered Africans people at all -- on whom they could **impose** their views and whom they could exploit at the same time they exploited the land. For example, with the incorporation of Nigeria into the international **economy** as a supplier of raw materials, new patriarchal conceptions of the **appropriate** social **role** for women dictated by colonial **administrators** and missionaries changed the position of women in **economic**, and therefore social, endeavors. Males began to **dominate** the cultivation of cash crops for the international market and confined women to the growing of food crops, which received lower returns. By **focusing** on men, the cash crop farmers, bureaucratic efforts to improve agriculture further encouraged the separation of **economic roles** of men and women that had **previously** complemented each other. The importing of cheap manufactured goods from Europe, and later from Japan, led to the **decline** of craft industry, except for a limited **range** of luxury goods which in some **regions** affected the **significant proportion** of women engaged in such manufacture. The **creation** of the colonial **economy** thus tended to marginalize the position of the **majority** of women.

Colonial **administrators** and Christian missionaries introduced the **assumptions** of European patriarchy into Nigerian society. Their ideas of the **appropriate** social **role** for women differed greatly from the **traditional role** of women in indigenous Nigerian societies. The ideas of the colonizers resembled the patriarchal European **assumption** that women belonged in the home, engaged in child rearing--an **exclusively** female responsibility--and other **domestic** chores. The colonizers expected African societies to consider women as subordinate to men because Europeans considered women subordinate to men. They thought that if a woman **obtained** **financial** independence she might not give her husband and his family their entitled respect. In pre-colonial indigenous Nigerian societies, however, a woman's **role** included providing for her family by means of **financial** support; therefore, her **traditional** responsibility **required** her **financial** independence. Furthermore, many members of the extended family helped to rear the children, not only the mother.

The **restrictions** that colonial governments placed on women changed the position of women in indigenous societies. In Nigeria, the colonial state passed **legislation restricting** women, indirectly preventing them from performing their duties towards their families. The extent of the changes inspired many Nigerian women to hold a **series** of protests throughout the colonial **period** against particular colonial **policies** and against colonialism itself. Colonialism disrupted the **traditional** system of production in indigenous Nigerian societies, reinforcing the existing systems of social inequality and introducing oppressive forms of social stratification throughout the state.

NOTE: The words in bold are from the AWL.

Source: <http://www.usp.nus.edu.sg/post/nigeria/womenov.html>